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The Concept of Self-Realization in Vedant: An Analytical Study

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***Abstract*—This paper examines the central teachings of Advaita Vedanta concerning the nature of the Atman (Self) and its identity with Brahman, the ultimate reality. Drawing primarily upon the philosophical insights of Adi Shankaracharya and key Upanishadic texts—including the Brihadaranyaka, Katha, and Aitareya Upanishads—the study elucidates the non-dual understanding of consciousness as the sole ontological foundation of existence. Vedanta affirms that consciousness itself is Brahman (Vijnanam Brahma) and proclaims the identity of the individual with the Absolute through the great saying (mahavakya) "Tat Tvam Asi" ("Thou art That").**

A distinctive contribution of Indian philosophy lies in its capacity to discriminate the true nature of the Self even amid the complex interplay of body, senses, and mind. Through the classic analogy of a red-hot iron sphere, the paper clarifies that apparent attributes such as heat or agency do not belong intrinsically to the substratum but are superimposed through association. In the same way, knowledge, which is the essential nature of the Soul, is commonly misattributed to the senses and mind. The actions of consciousness cannot arise from insentient matter; therefore, the conscious power observed in human experience is none other than the power of the Atman itself.

Shankara maintains that the pure Atman is neither the embodied individual soul (jiva) nor a collective aggregate of souls, but the universal Self upon which empirical selves depend. It is self-luminous, eternal, and free from the dualities of knower and known. Analysis of the three states of consciousness—waking, dreaming, and deep sleep—reveals that pure awareness persists uninterruptedly. In deep sleep, the sense of ego and object-awareness dissolves, yet the memory of peaceful rest upon waking demonstrates the continuity of consciousness. This continuity establishes that the essential nature of the Atman is objectless awareness or pure consciousness (chit).

Further, the Atman is characterized as Existence-Consciousness-Bliss (Sat-Chit-Ananda). Worldly pleasures are merely fragmented and distorted reflections of this intrinsic bliss. Because activity and agency imply change and limitation, Shankara denies that the pure Self can be an agent; agency belongs only to the empirical self under the influence of limiting adjuncts (upadhis). The paper presents Shankara's three principal arguments for the

existence of the Self: its direct perceptibility in the universal experience "I am," its indisputability (since any denial presupposes the Self), and its self-evident nature as the foundation of all means of knowledge (pramanas).
At the absolute (paramarthika) level, only Brahman is real; Ishvara (God) and jiva possess merely empirical (vyavaharika) reality. Liberation (moksha) consists in the direct realization of the non-difference between Atman and Brahman, dissolving the illusory cycle of birth and death. The paper concludes that self-knowledge is attainable solely through introspective experience and the discriminative insight that distinguishes the eternal Self from all that is non-Self (anatman). Thus, Vedanta offers a rigorous philosophical path from empirical individuality to the recognition of one's true nature as pure, infinite consciousness.

***Index Terms*—Advaita Vedanta, Atman, Brahman, Self-realization, Shankaracharya, Consciousness, Non-duality**

I. INTRODUCTION

Vedanta declares: Vijnanam Brahma, meaning that consciousness itself is Brahman (the Supreme Reality). Furthermore, it proclaims Tat Tvam Asi, "Thou art That" signifying that the individual is both knowledge and the Supreme Reality. A distinctive feature of Indian philosophy is its ability to discern the true nature of the Atman (the Self) even amidst the dense thicket of the body, senses, mind, and their various manifestations. Even within the whirlwind of bodily, sensory, and mental activity, it clearly perceives the distinction between the inert and the conscious. Although all observable physical activities are carried out by the body and its faculties, a superficial observer might mistake these for the true nature of the Atman. However, this is not the truth; these are merely extrinsic attributes or superimpositions associated with the Atman, not its essential nature. When iron turns red-hot in the fire, touching it causes the hand to burn. If one were asked how the burn occurred, the ordinary reply would be that touching the iron sphere caused it. From a philosophical perspective, however, this statement is not entirely accurate. The hand is not burned by the iron itself, but by the fire that has permeated every particle of it. When the fire leaves the iron sphere and it cools completely, touching the same sphere no longer produces a burn. The clear implication is that the burning agent is the fire, not the iron; the effect is attributed to the iron merely because of its association with fire. The same principle applies to burns caused by hot milk or ghee: one is not burned by the milk or ghee itself, but by the heat within them. Similarly, while afflictions such as attachment and aversion are often associated with the soul, they are not the soul's intrinsic attributes.

The situation regarding knowledge acquired through the senses and the mind is the reverse of common perception. Knowledge is the essential nature of the Soul, not of the senses or the mind. What is termed "sensory knowledge" or "mental knowledge" is merely an attribution of the Soul's knowledge to the senses and the mind. As long as the principle of consciousness pervades the body and senses, its activities remain manifest through the various limbs and organs. The iron-sphere

example clarifies this: while the iron served as the substratum for the fire, the act of burning and the heat pervading it were not intrinsic properties of the iron, but attributes of the fire. Due to their association, the burning was commonly attributed to the iron rather than to the fire at its core. In reality, even when conjoined, the existences of iron and fire remain distinct. The same principle applies to the relationship between the body, senses, mind, and Soul. The conscious activities manifested through the body, senses, and mind do not belong to them intrinsically; they belong to the Soul. The Soul is the driving force behind them, yet through attribution these actions are linked to the mind. Acts of contemplation and reflection belong to the Soul, though from a practical standpoint we attribute them to the mind.

It is an established principle of philosophy that the actions of insentient matter are insentient, while the actions of a conscious entity are conscious. A conscious entity cannot perform insentient actions, nor can insentient matter perform conscious actions. Therefore, the power of consciousness we observe is indeed the power of the Soul. Every school of Indian spiritual philosophy acknowledges that the Soul is the embodiment of knowledge—that its very essence is knowledge.

The inquisitive human mind has ceaselessly striven to comprehend the nature of the Atman. Self-knowledge is regarded as the supreme form of knowledge. We are aware of the existence of the Atman, yet we do not know what it truly is: whether it is finite or infinite; whether it is knowledge or supreme bliss; whether it is singular or one among many similar entities; whether it is a mere witness, an experience, or neither. Given the conflicting views regarding the nature of the Atman, Shankara posits that it partakes of the nature of both knowledge and ignorance at the empirical level. The true essence of the Atman, however, is eternal knowledge. This conscious reality—which is the cause of the insentient world—is not a conscious entity of limited power but is absolute; it is pure consciousness or sheer awareness—the supreme principle wherein there is no distinction between the knower, knowledge, and the object of knowledge. It is infinite, super sensuous, and the quintessence of absolute knowledge. Thus, Vedanta acknowledges only one principle—the Atman—and the Atman is of the nature of knowledge. Whatever exists apart from the Atman is Anatman (non-Self). The Anatman is the object of the Atman; it is grounded in the Atman and does not contradict the unity and non-duality of the Atman. Sureshwara states that in this world the existence of both the Atman and the Anatman is established through means of valid knowledge such as direct perception; in this context, the Atman underlies everything.

The essential nature of the Atman can never be non-Self. By the very law of its existence, it is eternally luminous. Just as the sun shines independently even in the absence of any object to illuminate, consciousness eternally resides within the Atman—even when there is no object of knowledge present. It is pure light, purely effulgent; it is not only the foundation of all our knowledge but also the illuminator of our very vision.

In the Aitareya Upanishad, the Atman is described as the fundamental principle or the primordial cause of the universe; the creation of the cosmos is acknowledged to have originated from the Atman itself. Since Brahman is synonymous with the primordial cause of the universe, the Atman is identified with Brahman. Furthermore, great aphorisms (mahavakyas) such as Tat Tvam Asi

(Thou Art That), Aham Brahmasmi (I am Brahman), and Ayam Atma Brahma (This Self is Brahman) articulate the oneness of Brahman and the Atman. The Atman is regarded as a manifestation of Brahman itself; there is no duality between the Atman and Brahman, and thus knowledge of the Self is synonymous with knowledge of Brahman. The objective of Vedanta is to lead one—through the analysis of the human soul—towards the reality of the singular, absolute Parabrahman (Supreme Brahman).

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad states regarding the Atman that it is that which speech cannot express but which enables speech to express; that which the mind cannot conceive but which empowers the mind to conceive; that which the eyes cannot see but which grants the eyes the power of sight; and that which causes the living being to breathe—this Supreme Reality is the Atman. The Kathopanishad declares that the Atman is subtler than the subtlest and greater than the greatest.

The Self as propounded by Shankara is neither the embodied individual soul nor a collective aggregate of such souls; rather, these souls are dependent upon the Universal Self. Shankara maintains that, in an empirical sense, it is not an object that can be indicated by words, nor is it an object of knowledge—like a cow—that can be grasped through ordinary means of cognition. It cannot be described in terms of generic qualities or specific characteristics; nor can we say that it acts in a particular way, for it is invariably described as inactive. Therefore, it defies precise description.

Yet the power of the Soul is self-evident; therefore, its existence cannot be denied. When it is considered a seer, its self-evident nature is automatically proved. Arguing in favour of the self-certainty of the Soul, Acharya Shankara writes: “Atma tu pramanadi-vyavaharasrayatvat, prageva pramanadi-vyavaharat siddhyati.” To prove the existence of the Soul there is no need of any external proof in Shankara’s Vedanta, because it automatically presents the proof of its existence in each of our behaviours. On the contrary, the Soul is the basis of all evidences. That is why it is said in the Upanishads: “Yatah siddhih pramananam sa katham taih prasidhyati”—How can that which is the basis of all proofs be proved by means of those proofs?

Our self-consciousness is an active consciousness that strives to achieve a purpose. The sense of agency is the most immediate experience for each of us; this empirical self is the doer of all actions. If agency were the essential nature of the Self, liberation from it would be impossible—just as heat can never be separated from fire—and until a person is liberated from their own agency, they fail to attain their highest goal, for agency is inherently bound up with suffering. The agency of the Self depends merely on attributes superimposed upon it, not on its own intrinsic nature.

Within the Jivatma (individual soul) there exists an organised system of memories, associations, desires, aversions, habits, and purposes. Although, in essence, the Jiva is equated with the Atman, Shankara carefully distinguishes between the Atman implied in all experience and the Atman known as a definite fact through intuition; he further differentiates between the spiritual subject “I” and the psychological subject—the seeker of liberation (mumukshu). The object of the notion of “I” (aham-pratyaya) is not the pure Atman—which is the Witness—but rather the Jivatma,

which acts and reaps the fruits of action; it is this self, encompassing subjective attributes, that constitutes the object.

When a person is in the waking state, they identify solely with the body and senses as their true self. Even during the dream state, one remains aware of objects derived from memory impressions; consequently, the sense of "I-ness" (ego) persists. In the state of deep sleep, however, there is no awareness of any object. In the absence of objects, the very sense of being a "knower" vanishes, and the distinction between the knower and the known dissolves. One is no longer even aware of being confined within the boundaries of the body. Yet consciousness is not extinguished in this state; otherwise, upon waking, how would one experience the realisation—"I slept very peacefully," "I had a sound sleep," or "I did not dream at all"? If we were completely unconscious in that state, how could we retain the memory of these experiences?

The experience of deep sleep offers us a glimpse into the state of the Atman free from identification with the body. In its true nature, the Atman is not a being prone to even the slightest suffering. It is devoid of the sense of ego—that quality which causes the individual soul to perceive itself as separate from others. The Atman remains free from all such experiences. This reveals that, in reality, the Atman is pure consciousness and the embodiment of bliss. The Atman is self-luminous within every living being. Everyone experiences "I am"; no one experiences "I am not." However, so many varied meanings are associated with this "I" that subtle analysis and reasoning are required to ascertain the true nature of the Atman.

One approach to examining this subject is the analysis of the meaning of the word "I." Sometimes "I" is used to refer to the body—for instance, "I am fat." At other times it denotes a sensory organ; for example, "I am blind in one eye." Occasionally it signifies a motor organ, as in "I am lame." Sometimes "I" refers to the inner faculty (mind/intellect), such as in "I think," while at other times it signifies the knower, as in "I know." Amidst these usages, what should be considered the true essence or nature of the Atman? To determine this, we must focus on the true characteristic of existence: that which persists through all states of an object constitutes its authentic nature.

We can arrive at the aforementioned principle only by comparing the three states of our daily life: waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. The essential consciousness of the Atman invariably persists through these three states; otherwise, how could the existence of the Atman be sustained across them? What common element do we find in all these states? In the first state there is awareness of external objects. In the second state there is awareness only of internal objects in the form of dreams. In the state of deep sleep there is no awareness of any object. Yet consciousness does not cease to exist, for upon waking from deep sleep one retains the memory of the bliss experienced during that state; thus the element that remains constant is consciousness. It is evident, therefore, that the true nature of the Atman is objectless awareness or pure consciousness. Shankaracharya has stated that drishti (awareness/knowledge) itself constitutes the nature of the Atman; the drashta (seer or knower) distinct from drishti is not the true nature of the Atman.

In its true nature, the Soul is the embodiment of pure consciousness and bliss. This bliss persists to some degree even in the waking and dreaming states, although its form becomes distorted. The fleeting joys experienced in the waking and dreaming states are merely fragments of that very Sat-

Chit-Ananda (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss). A person derives joy from acquiring wealth and the like because they internalize these things—essentially making them their own. Thus, the Soul itself is the primal source of all joy. The pleasure derived from worldly objects is trivial and transient because the soul becomes constricted when it limits itself to such petty and fleeting things. Once the soul realizes its true nature, it is no longer concerned with any external object; it becomes the very embodiment of bliss.

Shankara posits an absence of activity within the Atman, as activity is inherently impermanent. The Atman cannot be the locus of any action, because an action inevitably brings about some change in the entity wherein it resides. All forms of action presuppose the notion of an individual self, and such action is of the nature of suffering; its driving force is desire. Both action and the enjoyment of pleasure depend upon a dualistic perspective, and the dualistic perspective is not the ultimate truth. Action cannot occur in the Atman without limiting factors such as the body, and every such limitation is unreal. The Atman possesses no agency of its own. According to Shankara, the attributes of the Atman are truth, self-subsistence (resting upon its own greatness), omnipresence, and the characteristic of being the essence of all existence.

II. ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF THE SOUL

Shankaracharya has put forward the following arguments in support of the existence of the Soul:

1. Directly Perceptible: The existence of the Self is immediately and directly evident. Shankara states that all human beings experience the sense of "I am." No one experiences "I am not." If knowledge of the Self were not universally established, people would experience its non-existence; however, since they do not, the Self must exist.
2. Indisputability: The existence of the Atman is indisputable. Shankara asserts that the Atman is indisputable because the very knowledge of the one who might attempt to refute or deny it is, in fact, the Atman itself.
3. Self-evident Nature: The Atman is self-evident because it is a matter of direct experience. It serves as the foundation for all means of knowledge (pramanas); thus it is established prior to all such means. Without it, no means of knowledge could exist. Shankara states that since the Atman is the substratum for all cognitive processes and transactions involving knowledge, it is established even before those processes begin.

III. CONCLUSION

It is evident from the foregoing description that Shankaracharya accepts Brahman as the sole ultimate reality and asserts the unity of the Atman (individual self) and Brahman. According to him, entities such as Ishvara (God) and Jiva (individual soul) possess empirical reality, whereas at the absolute level only Brahman is real. While the Jiva must enter this world to experience the fruits of its actions, Ishvara is described as the presiding authority who dispenses the fruits of those actions. Both hold significance only at the empirical level. At the ultimate level, neither God nor

the individual soul exists. It is impossible to describe Brahman, because description requires duality, whereas Brahman is absolutely free from duality. The dualistic world is empirical or perceptible. The liberating truth—which frees the individual soul from the cycle of birth and death—is the realisation of its non-difference from Brahman. "Tat Tvam Asi" (That Thou Art) is the fundamental truth of all existence. The diversity of the world and the endless stream of birth are real only as appearances. A person can attain knowledge of the Self only through their own experience and existence; thus one can gain self-knowledge through introspection.

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